

[Article](#)[Media](#)[Additional Info](#)[Home](#) > [Sports & Recreation](#) > [Other Sports](#)

# Cockfighting

## spectacle



Print



Cite



Share



More

### WRITTEN BY

#### The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree....

[See Article History](#)

### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

[Technological Ingenuity Quiz](#)["The Most Perfect Refreshment": A Garden Quiz](#)[B Major: A Look at Beethoven Quiz](#)

**Cockfighting**, the sport of pitting gamecocks to fight and the breeding and training of them for that purpose. The game fowl is probably the nearest to the Indian red [jungle fowl](#) (*Gallus gallus*), from which all domestic chickens are believed to be descended.

**cockfighting**

Fighting cocks.

© Wilfredo Rodríguez (A Britannica Publishing Partner [↗](#))

The sport was popular in ancient times in India, China, Persia, and other Eastern countries and was introduced into Greece in the time of [Themistocles](#) (c. 524–460 BC). The sport spread throughout [Asia Minor](#) and Sicily. For a long time the Romans affected a despisement of this “Greek diversion,” but they ended up adopting it so enthusiastically that the agricultural writer [Columella](#) (1st century AD) complained that its devotees often spent their whole patrimony in [betting](#) at the side of the pit.

From Rome the sport spread northward. Although opposed by the Christian clergy, it nevertheless became popular in the [Low Countries](#), Italy, Germany, [Spain](#) and its colonies, and throughout England, [Wales](#), and [Scotland](#). Occasionally authorities tried to repress it, but cockfighting remained a favourite pastime of the English royalty and gentry from the early 16th century to the 19th century.

Cockfighting pits were circular, with a matted stage about 20 feet (6 metres) in diameter and surrounded by a barrier to keep the birds from falling off. The mains (matches) usually consisted of fights between an agreed number of pairs of birds, the majority of victories deciding the main. There were two other varieties that aroused the particular ire of moralists, however—the battle royal, in which a number of birds were “set” (i.e., placed in the pit at the same time) and allowed to remain until all but one, the victor, were killed or disabled, and the Welsh main, in which eight pairs were matched, the eight victors paired again, then four, and finally the last surviving pair.

Cockfighting was introduced into the North [American colonies](#) at an early date, but it was soon forbidden by some of the older states; Massachusetts passed laws against [animal cruelty](#) in 1836. Cockfighting was prohibited by law in Great Britain in 1849. The sport is expressly prohibited in Canada and in most U.S. states. Although cockfighting ceased to be a public sport in the United States, Canada, and the [British Isles](#), it continued to exist clandestinely in those countries. In the United States the sport was extremely popular along the Atlantic seaboard and in the South.

Cockfighting is not recognized as a form of sport by the Latin American countries in general, although it persists in several areas. Paraguay prohibited it by law. In Cuba, however, cockfighting continued to be regulated by the government until curtailed by th

Castro regime in 1959. The sport became popular in Haiti, Mexico, [Puerto Rico](#), and the [Philippines](#), the latter two being important cockfighting centres.



### cockfighting

Caged fighting cocks, Venezuela.

© Wilfredo Rodríguez (A Britannica Publishing Partner [↗](#))

Those who enjoy cockfighting insist that theirs is an amateur—not a professional—sport and that the greatest zest to be obtained from it lies in the many chances to gamble before and throughout a fight. Odds against one bird or the other fluctuate constantly, and it is not uncommon for a great deal of money to be wagered. Cocks usually are put to the main when between one and two years of age. Before their entrance into the fighting pit, they are given intensive training.

Before a fight, spurs of metal or bone are slipped over the natural spurs of the gamecocks. The modern short spur is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches (4 cm) or less in length; the longer spur scales from 2 to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches (5 to 6 cm). In ancient times cocks were permitted to fight until one or the other was killed. Although some fights still are to an absolute finish, later rules have sometimes permitted the withdrawal at any time of a badly damaged cock. Other rules fix a time limit for each fight. On rare occasions when a gamecock refuses to fight longer, his handler puts him breast to breast with the other bird. If he still refuses, it is ruled that he has quit, and the fight ends. At all mains the judge's word is absolute law, even as to gambling. There is no appeal from his decisions.

This article was most recently revised and updated by [Robert Lewis](#), Assistant Editor.

**LEARN MORE** in these related Britannica articles:

#### [sports: The formation of national identity](#)

...Geertz's classic study of Balinese cockfighting, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1972), illustrates another case in point. Although Balinese culture is based on the avoidance of conflict, men's identification with birds allows for the vicarious expression of hostility...

## Philippines: Sports and recreation

**Cockfighting** (sabong), an age-old pastime in the Philippines, has retained a passionate following. It is a popular form of gambling, with many spectators betting on the outcome of the fights. Although practiced throughout the country, cockfighting is most strongly associated with Cebu....

## Haiti: Sports and recreation

...passion-inspiring gaming is provided by cockfighting, which takes place every Sunday in almost every village and neighbourhood across the country. Considerable sums of money pass hands at these gatherings, and a successful trainer can become a powerful figure in the community. Another popular form of gambling is borlette, a street...



HISTORY AT YOUR  
FINGERTIPS

Sign up here to see what happened On This Day, every day in your inbox!

Email address

Sign Up

By signing up, you agree to our [Privacy Notice](#).



## Cockfighting

QUICK FACTS

### RELATED TOPICS

[Battle royal](#)  
[Welsh main](#)  
[Rooster](#)

---

**Inspire your inbox** – Sign up for daily fun facts about this day in history, updates, and special offers.

Enter your email

**Subscribe**

By signing up for this email, you are agreeing to news, offers, and information from Encyclopaedia Britannica.

[Click here to view our Privacy Notice.](#) Easy unsubscribe links are provided in every email.



[About Us & Legal Info](#) [Partner Program](#) [Contact Us](#) [Privacy Notice](#) [Terms of Use](#)

©2021 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Last Viewed by First Circuit Library on 01/15/2021

